

Battling hairy bittercress



Linda Estep
Master Gardener

Question: I have been trying to get rid of a particular weed in my yard that is quite annoying. When I pull it up, the seed pods explode and spread everywhere. The first time I pulled it up, I wasn't wearing glasses and several seed pods ended up in my eye. What is this and how do I keep it out of my landscaped areas?

Answer: This troublesome weed is hairy bittercress (*Cardamine hirsute*). Hairy bittercress is a fast-spreading winter annual or biennial weed belonging to the mustard family. It typically grows in moist or disturbed areas, such as lawns, gardens and along pathways.

The leaves of bittercress are actually edible, have a peppery taste and are a great addition to salads. Just be sure and harvest before they flower.

Identifying this plant is crucial for effective removal. The first true leaves are heart-shaped, followed by compound leaves with two or more pairs of leaflets. The leaves that emerge in the fall are delicate and deeply lobed. They form a small rosette that will overwinter.

The leaves have a light green coloration and may have fine hairs, hence the name hairy bittercress. Once the weather warms in the spring, it sends up stalks of small, white flowers followed by slender, elongated seed pods known as siliques.

Hairy bittercress has a rapid growth cycle, quickly producing seeds that can be dispersed over a wide area. It has been recorded that each plant can produce anywhere from 700 to 5,000 seeds. When the plant is disturbed, those seeds are forcibly ejected from the mother plant up to 16 feet away. This makes early detection and removal essential to prevent its spread.

Now for the really important question which is, how do we get rid of this pesky weed? Prevention is key. The methods used to eliminate hairy bittercress from your yard are actually the same for eliminating all weeds.

1. When you bring home container plants from nurseries, garden exchanges or plant sales, pay



PHOTO COURTESY OF OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Once the weather warms in the spring, the hairy bittercress sends up stalks of small, white flowers followed by slender, elongated seed pods known as siliques.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

The first few leaves of a hairy bittercress plant are heart-shaped, followed by compound leaves with two or more pairs of leaflets. Leaves that emerge in the fall are delicate and deeply lobed. They form a small rosette such as this that will overwinter.

attention to what else may be in the pot. Remove any signs of weeds before placing the new plants into your garden. Contaminated materials

can introduce hairy bittercress seeds (and other types of weeds) into your landscape areas.

2. When purchasing new seeds

or soil, ensure they are certified weed-free.

3. Weeds need water to germinate, so instead of watering a broad garden area and then having to weed that same area, use drip irrigation and apply water directly to the desired plants. This keeps much of the garden dry but reduces the growth of weeds.

4. Mulching can be an alternative to weeding. Mulching provides weed suppression because when bare soil is covered, many weed seeds just can't germinate or grow through the mulch. Organic mulches suppress the growth of weeds, conserve moisture, and tend to improve the soil as they break down. Organic mulch may be shredded bark, shredded leaves, pine needles, compost or newspaper. For garden paths, newspaper, old carpeting or similar materials covered with sawdust provide excellent weed suppression.

Perseverance is a major factor in keeping your landscaped areas weed free. Every day, the gardener must be on the lookout for seemingly ever-present weeds. It is most effective to remove weeds when they are young and tender. If they have not gone to seed, it is fine to turn them under using a hoe. If they have gone to seed, you will need to hand pull and throw away.

Don't use a hoe on weeds that have gone to seed or have flowered because you will just be planting weed seeds.

The best time to pull or hoe weeds is when the soil is damp but not wet. A day or two after a rain or irrigation is probably the best time. If you weed when the soil is too wet, you can damage the soil structure. When the soil is too dry, weeds are much harder to pull or hoe.

Now is the time to get outside and look for those small rosettes that are growing. If you are diligent in following the steps as outlined above, you should experience success in getting rid of the hairy bittercress that is causing so much annoyance.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.